The Accented American: the new voices of British stardom on US television

Christopher Holliday

Abstract

This article investigates the cycle of British performers in contemporary American television drama and what is at stake in their adoption of a US accent. British actors have been increasingly heralded for their ability to adopt credible foreign accents, marking a negotiation of 'Britishness' and assumed vocal 'foreignness.' By examining several pilot episodes of contemporary US dramas, this article poses the hybrid voice of the 'accented American' as a privileged and self-reflexive form of sonic spectacle. This is a voice narratively 'othered' to reinforce the screen presence of the British actor-as-American, soliciting spectators' attention to their extra-textual identities as non-natives, whilst paradoxically consecrating 'Britishness' through the individual actor's quality command of American language. The article then concludes by scrutinising the post-9/11 captive narrative of successful US drama *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-). Through its themes of dubious patriotic allegiance, *Homeland* inscribes the cultural discourses surrounding Damian Lewis's starring role and falsified Americanness. The series also operates as a valuable commentary upon the wider proliferation of British talent across US television, revealing the ways in which such small-screen dramas are helping to regenerate prior conceptions of British stardom.

Keywords: accent, quality television, American drama, stardom, performance, *Homeland*.

This article makes preliminary investigations into the spate of British actors cast in long-form American television drama series during in the post-millennial period. In

particular, it casts a spotlight upon the extensive number of British actors affecting American accents within their small-screen performance, passing off their characters as US-born. Despite a 'long-standing' history of transatlantic appearances made by European actors in Hollywood cinema (Vincendeau and Philips 2006: 3), the recent injection of UK actors onto US television to masquerade as home-grown Americans invites closer scrutiny of this notable shift in industry practice. By examining the pilot episodes of a cross-section of contemporary US dramas, this article poses the hybrid voice of the 'accented American' as a privileged and self-reflexive form of sonic spectacle through its careful textual inscription. The 'otherness' of the British actor is frequently collapsed into the nuances of character, and through close investigation of the US drama *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-), I suggest the performance of British actor Damian Lewis as Sergeant Nicholas Brody both bears out the self-conscious narrative treatment of British actors-as-Americans, whilst operating as a valuable commentary upon the wider proliferation of British star talent across US television.

US television and the American masquerade

The major presence of British actors in the mainstream American television industry, and the 'taking over' of US primetime series by UK performers (Grosz 2014: npn), has been analysed through a multitude of competing frameworks. These include heralding the opportunities for an actor to raise their profile by starring in acclaimed small-screen productions, to the view that British actors represent a form of cheap labour. British actor Dominic West, who starred in the acclaimed HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008), suggests that UK performers are 'More value-for-money, that's really what it is. If they wanted someone experienced and I was American, they'd pay a lot of money. We're cheaper' (qtd. in Spencer 2010: npn). Beyond their status as an economically viable alternative to American performers, UK actors have also been widely credited with a

productive anonymity. The 'un-starry' nature of UK actors abroad makes them better suited to ensemble programmes, with their obscurity preserving an authenticity for viewers who do not identify them through the prism of previous characters. UK actors performing in American television dramas have been examined for their commercial potential too. Elke Weissman argues the presence of UK actors is part of a growing recognition by US producers of the importance of attracting UK audiences (2012: 171). Rather than relying wholly on the domestic market, producers look abroad to recoup their costs whilst relying on syndication overseas to fulfil production deficits. With American television programming, as Weissman puts it, 'it makes sense to include UK actors to offer a local flavour to audiences in the UK' (2012: 171), because British performers constitute such a strong entry point for the highly important UK market.

Embedded deep within the transnational framework that structures American drama series on television, UK actors working in America are also the locus for multiple discourses regarding television 'quality.' Despite numerous critical investigations unpacking the distinctions of 'quality' television, it remains an area wrought with conflict and contradiction. The factors underpinning the criteria of 'quality' have been traced from the Golden Era of US television in the 1950s through to something located squarely with the artistic achievements of HBO's original programming (with its iconic slogan 'This isn't television, this is HBO') from the mid-1990s onwards. Critically-acclaimed programmes such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005) *The Wire*, *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-) and *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) have been praised for going 'beyond anything imaginable in the old network era in terms of content, narrative complexity, language and lots more' (Thompson 2007: xvii).

Given the cultural cachet of quality television as both critically lauded and commercially popular, the migration of British actors to America seems unsurprising. Traditionally held during January, 'Pilot Season' involves the major US broadcast television networks ABS, CBS, NBC and Fox pitching new programmes to be cast by Springtime. During this period, UK actors often depart from British shores to try their luck abroad. In August 2013, the *Independent*'s Gerard Gilbert described the batch of 'British thesps clutching US visas' boarding planes in a mass exodus of television talent (2013: npn), citing the departure of British television actors David Tennant and Mackenzie Crook for roles in *Rex Is Not Your Lawyer* (NBC, 2009) and *Almost Human* (Fox, 2013-2014) respectively. Despite the attraction of appearing on American television as the culmination of their acting achievements, Weissman ultimately identifies the increasing 'reliance' by US quality American dramas upon UK actors, particularly 'the more recent HBO incarnations' again along the fault lines of quality (2012: 170). He argues that 'In America, UK acting is often celebrated as qualitatively superior' (Weissman 2012: 170), an assumption stemming from historical relationships to classical theatre and the effect of a Shakespearean heritage upon British acting talent. Emerging from these theatrical traditions, British actors become 'high cultural capital' for American producers and studio executives alike (Spicer 2006: 141), who view the pedigree of such performers—and their rigorous levels of training—in high regard. The 'quality' of 'quality television' in the US, then, becomes ascribed to the acting abilities of the UK actor. The screen presence of British actors on long-form American television carries the weight of their elite training, and functions as a small-screen outlet for their prestigious acting talents.

The critical discourses mobilised around British actors, and their aptitude for quality acting, is supplemented by the very act of affecting an accent within a screen

performance. The scholarly turn in Film Studies towards nuances of acting has increasingly positioned an actor's vocal qualities as central to the achievement and appreciation of their screen performance. The ability of an actor to adopt a specific national dialect has been imbricated within what Paul McDonald labels 'the spectacle of prestige performance' and the 'show of actorly craft' (2013: 223). The faithful reproduction, and subsequent mastery, of a regional or national accent alien to their own is conditioned by the 'personal commitment' on behalf of the actor who engages in the self-conscious 'display of transformation' (McDonald 2013: 223). The performer's accomplished portrayal of a 'foreigner' therefore differs from the loss of an accent through sustained geographical relocation, or prolonged residence in a foreign land. The inflections and intonations of a new voice emerge from high levels of polish and skill within the performance itself, rather than as an involuntary symptom of the actor's real-life migration. As Jeff Siegel acknowledges:

> No matter how good actors are at producing another dialect in a film or television series, they have not actually acquired that dialect. What we see and hear is a performance – that is, imitation of a dialect that they are familiar with rather than linguistic proficiency in this dialect (2010: 65).

The versatility of the actor's voice not only extends to the delivery of dialogue within the execution of performance, but also in the ability of an actor to rely upon impersonation as form of masking that deafens spectators as to their true nationality. For James Naremore, the acquisition of an accent is part of a performative process involving the realisation of the 'adjectives and predicates' of the 'role' that is otherwise a 'prefilmic development established before the cameras turn' (1990: 158). When the 'performing skills' of the actor, including the mobilisation of the habits of a voice, are

applied, the role becomes determined through a greater 'range of meanings' (Naremore 1990: 158). This is close to what Gianluca Sergi means by the voice remaining under an actor's 'control,' and how it must be 'used' accordingly as part of the formation of a character (and their traits) that are otherwise the preserve of the script (1999: 107-108).

Not all UK actors performing within contemporary American television series have adopted a US accent. In fact, the *absence* of native 'Americanness' at the expense of 'Britishness' is regularly exploited to connote a character's glamour of exoticism. Scottish actress Ashley Jensen's role as Christina McKinney in *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010), for example, draws upon her 'foreign' vernacular within the nuanced construction of character in Silvio Horta's surreal commentary on the American fashion industry. Hidden 'in the closet' away from the designers at the Manhattan-based fashion magazine *Mode*, in-house seamstress Christina admits to the eponymous 'ugly' Betty Suarez that she enjoys her marginalised role 'mostly because I'm by myself.' Christina's emerging alliance with Betty is soon predicated upon their shared professional aspirations, and a mutual desire for industry visibility. However, the devices comically 'othering' Betty (physical appearance, awkward demeanour, Latino heritage) are further paralleled by Christina's quirky sensibility and offshore national identity. Christina's distinctiveness as a non-US native is repeatedly enforced throughout the series. Even the repetition of 'Braveheart' as her nickname brings into relief her colleagues' prejudices and her perceived embodiment of headstrong Scottish independence. Britishness is inscribed as a specific idiosyncrasy of Christina, with issues of foreign geography and unfamiliar locale mined to connote her particular status as 'exotic outsider' (Macnab 2000: 143). If Betty's identity as a minority in *Ugly Betty* is achieved through the unconventional, 'ugly' way she looks (an appearance altered by

the programme's final episode), then Christina is framed as a culturally 'othered' body by how she sounds (Sowards and Pineda 2011: 127-130).

The integrity of citizenship and nationality within British actors has been fully exploited on American television in Englishman's Ian McShane's role as American pimp, Al Swearengen, in HBO's *Deadwood*. Whereas the real-life historical figure of Swearengen was born in Iowa, the casting of McShane repositioned the character as a 'slimy limey' of rumoured English heritage. In *Deadwood*'s first episode, Swearengen's odd hybrid accent prompts an inebriated customer to pass judgment on his mixed birthright ('Now, with that limey-damn accent of yours, are these rumours true that you're descended from the British nobility?') Swearengen's subsequent response is typically curt ('I'm descended from all them cocksuckers'). As a hybrid man with an indeterminate background and bloodline, Swearengen's identity is both affirmed and exploited by the casting of McShane, predominantly a television actor and known among UK audiences as the eponymous antiques dealer *Lovejoy* (BBC, 1986-1994). Yet McShane's relative anonymity coupled with his national identity feeds into Swearengen's alien presence as a dubious, yet highly adaptive, figure: he is an 'amalgam of voices, styles, and gestures' (Jacobs 2006: 13). Swearengen's hybridised, lilting accent certainly functions as an interpretive signal that provides a vocal shorthand to the character's distinctive—albeit re-imagined—transnational background.

Despite persuasive evidence of UK actors maintaining the cadence of their British accents to secure their foreignness—Jonny Lee Miller as eccentric Sherlock Holmes in crime drama *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-); James Purefoy as serial killer Joe Carroll in *The Following* (Fox, 2013-)—by mastering credible foreign inflection, British actors have been widely heralded for their accomplished portrayal of Americans. An exhaustive list

of those British actors performing as Americans is beyond the scope of this article. Yet prominent examples of this practice include Marianne Jean-Baptiste (*Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002-2009)), Joely Richardson (*Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003-2010)), Ed Westwick (*Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-2012)), Jonny Lee Miller (*Eli Stone* (ABC, 2008-2009)), Stephen Moyer (*True Blood* (FX, 2008-)), Alan Cumming and Archie Panjabi (*The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-)), Joseph Fiennes (*Flash Forward* (ABC, 2009-2010)), Andrew Lincoln and David Morrissey (*The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-)), Laura Fraser (*Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2010-2013)), Stephen Graham (*Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-)), Sam Palladio (*Nashville* (ABC, 2012-)), Saffron Burrows (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-)) and Hugh Dancy (*Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-)).

Displaying their 'actorly craft' as they affect persuasive American vernacular, such actors function within a perceived hierarchy of performance, one that privileges the vocal styling of British performers over the abilities of their US counterparts to successfully mimic UK voices. Gary D. Rhodes identifies a tradition (predominantly in cinema) of 'poor acting' in which 'another American actor [is] doing an overdone British accent' (2010: 31). Greater critical praise is certainly reserved for UK actors who can successfully imitate the vocal patterns of the American language to reduce any trace of their native accent. Multiple critics are, for example, universal in their praise of Hugh Laurie's flawless accent as acerbic diagnostician and East Coast native Gregory House in *House* (Fox, 2004-2012). The actor's ability to eliminate his Received Pronunciation accent has garnered the actor sustained industry and popular praise. Rachel Ray comments how 'Laurie's Golden-Globe winning portrayal of a drug-addicted doctor in New Jersey was so real that Dustin Hoffman described Dr. House's voice as the most convincing American accent from a non-American he had ever heard' (2013: npn).

Within the expression of falsified American national identity and the manipulation of the voice through an accent, 'ultimately it is left to the critics to consecrate and recognize the artistic legitimacy of performance' (McDonald 2013: 224). This extends to producers and networks who must also be convinced by an actor's assumed nationality (enough, perhaps, to commission a full series). One of the main criteria for success within 'Pilot Season,' as Gilbert suggests, is that your American accent is 'up to scratch' (2013: npn). Indeed, the US accent often arbitrates how the concept of a 'quality performance' by a UK actor on American television is to be judged. British actor Martin Freeman's performance as downtrodden Lester Nygaard in *Fargo* (FX, 2014-), a re-telling of the Coen Brothers' 1995 film set in wintery Minnesota, indicates how a convincing accent is a default factor in determining television quality. As Ellen E. Jones puts it in her review of episode one, 'Freeman can't quite pull off the "Aw, jeez" Upper Midwest accent, which was such a joy in the original movie' (2014: npn). Early critical responses to Tennant's return to US television for crime drama *Gracepoint* (2014)—a remake of British series *Broadchurch* (Kudos, 2013)—has also borne out the importance of persuasive accented speech when measuring the success of a role (Buist 2014: npn).

The emerging context(s) of the 'accented American,' however, have reframed the critical judgment of the actor's voice and re-positioned accents as the locus for new forms of cultural and critical enquiry. The *hybrid* voice of the British-as-American actor opens a space where the merits of the performance (and the *realisation* of character) become yoked to the sustained *revelation* of the voice as one of mere impersonation. The 'accented' voice remains a repeated point of contention and celebration, mentioned widely in the trade and popular press, and situated at the heart of numerous promotional

duties undertaken by the actor. The accent of the 'accented American' has developed into the cornerstone of promotional enterprises that constitute what Richard Dyer called the 'secondary circulation' of the star phenomenon operating outside screen performance, from interviews to gossip columns (1998: 129). Within television fan culture, many websites, forums and discussions boards have delighted in 'outing' actors in terms of their truthful nationality. Popular US-based social news and entertainment platforms (*Buzzfeed*, *The Wire*) have also run features unveiling the multilingualism of imported actors invading American television series (Yapalater 2013: npn). Such extratextual processes of disclosure impact upon viewers' engagement with the actor onscreen, inviting them to judge the ontology of performance and discern the accuracy of the accent. There exists an undoubted cultural fascination, humour and intrigue within the new cycle of the 'accented American,' with heightened levels of curiosity surrounding the negotiation of offscreen Britishness with onscreen Americanness. But this negotiation of nationalities is not just the preserve of journalistic or fan discussion, but is manifest within the programmes themselves through more exhibitionist processes of textual inscription.

The accented American as sonic spectacle

Within the context of contemporary Hollywood cinema, McDonald has discussed the textual orientation of a star's voice as it is coerced into 'an exhibitionist display of meaning' by being actively 'lifted out of the general spectacle of film presentation to become a leading attraction' (McDonald 2012: 171). This enacting of the actions of the voice as spectacle through a process of 'lifting' can be allied with US television and its portrayal of the 'accented American.' The radical otherness of the foreign (British) 'non-American' actor is frequently made to meet onscreen with the character in a self-conscious textual recognition of their falsified Americanness. This process shapes the

accented voice as a sonic 'spectacle'—orienting speech as a sudden 'burst of presence' (Gunning 2004: 45)—causing a pleasurable rupture between performer and character. Such momentary discord crafts a space both in tandem with, and in excess of, narrative meaning: a moment negotiating the union of a recognisable body matched with a 'foreign' voice. A cross-section of 'accented Americans' reveals how such characters are often narratively 'othered,' and what role the voice holds in this self-conscious trading on their small-screen masquerade. If some systems of cinematic spectacle therefore incite spectators to 'stop and stare' (King 2000: 4), then the televisual spectacle of the 'accented American' participates in a comparable invitation offered to audiences to 'stop and listen.'

Created by Russian-born Jew Dmitry Lipkin, *The Riches* (FX, 2007-2008) tells the story of The Malloy family of travelling con artists, headed by British performers Minnie Driver and (co-creator) Eddie Izzard, who was born in the former British colony of Aden in Yemen. Their adopted American accents are entirely appropriate for the series' narrative arc rooted in duplicity and deceit, in which the Malloys assume the identities of a wealthy (and recently deceased) American family, the Riches. In her examination of the series prior to its cancellation after two seasons, Maurya Wickstrom argues that having 'purloined' the identities of the Rich family for a more affluent lifestyle, drug-addict Dahlia Malloy ('Cherien Rich') and husband-thief Wayne ('Doug Rich') must 'convince the neighbours of their authenticity in their produced personalities' (2012: 148). The nomadic lifestyle of the Malloys as American Travellers in the South and their sustained deception speaks to the verbal ruse undertaken by Driver and Izzard who similarly 'produce' an American personality as part of their own confidence trick. Just as Dahlia/Cherien and Wayne/Doug divert attention from their true heritage and wealth,

the extratextual status of Driver and Izzard as foreigners likewise 'purloining' an American identity is implicated within this doubled act of masquerade.

Aligning high-class male prostitution with contemporary suburban Detroit, Michigan, Lipkin's later series *Hung* (HBO, 2009-2011) is significant not least for its portrayal of the financial hardship and industrial downturn of Middle America. *Hung*'s opening images announce a town in the throes of recession: a decrepit corrugated iron building, a demolished American football stadium, with protagonist and gigolo Ray Drecker's (Thomas Jane) voiceover reporting how 'everything's falling apart' with Detroit now the 'headwaters of a river of failure.' But as Maryann Erigha argues, the socio-cultural landscape of Lipkin's programme ultimately occludes African Americans 'from this picture of economic decline' (2013: 144). Despite an '82.7 percent black population and only a 7.8 percent white, non-Hispanic population,' Erigha admits 'the majority of *Hung*'s cast is white' (2013: 144). The casting of black, Nottingham-born actor Lennie James as pimp and Detroit-native Charlie redresses this racial (im)balance. However, despite his presence *Hung* generally 'defies' social reality and the consequences of the 'Great Recession on African Americans in the Detroit metropolitan area' (Erigha 2013: 144). Prior to *Hung*, James had exhibited his aptitude for convincing American vernacular in *Jericho* (CBS, 2006-2008), playing the enigmatic Robert Hawkins in the short-lived post-apocalyptic series. The revelation that the clandestine Hawkins is, in fact, a CIA covert operations officer with a missions objective concerning stolen Russian warheads, feeds off James' rogue status as a non-native. As with Lipkin's *The Riches*, however, *Hung* also mines the 'actorly craft' of the 'accented American' within the diegetic depiction of James' character. The fascination towards the pimp Charlie displayed by other characters in *Hung* (notably Ray's own pimp Tanya Skagle, played by Jane Adams) positions the unknowable and unfathomable Charlie as the locus for

recurrent questions of truthful identity (leading to their romantic involvement later in the series).

The status of British actor (playing an American) continues to inform and illuminate certain nuances of the role being realised. The constructedness of the 'bionic' Jaime Sommers in *The Bionic Woman* (NBC, 2007), as she is impossibly modified to super-human extremes, is enhanced by the casting of British actress Michelle Ryan. Ryan's faked US accent ties into the mythology of a cyborg character, whose excess femininity is predicated upon scientific modification, rebuilt appearance and, thus, a falsified identity that must remain covert. In *Pushing Daisies* (ABC, 2007-2008), British actress Anna Friel also plays at reanimated life as the dead (but now resurrected) Charlotte 'Chuck' Charles. Chuck's pretence as 'normal' housewife and homemaker is exacerbated by Friel's convincing US accent, while the character, in an echo of Friel's performance, is able to speak several foreign languages as part of her facade. Liverpudlian actor Ian Hart's performance as schizophrenic paparazzo Don Konkey in *Dirt* (FX, 2007-2008) also engages with discourses of authenticity by manipulating a sense of social belonging germane to the 'accented American.' During the programme's opening episode, Don's 'otherness' is immediately verbalised. He is described as 'tweaked' (American slang for methamphetamine intoxication) and a 'real nut job' by fellow employees at the *DirtNow* celebrity gossip magazine. The peculiar vicissitudes of Don's character emerge equally through specific mannerisms, including nervous paranoia, involuntary physical tics, uncontrollable laughter and hallucinations from refusing to administer his prescribed medication. Don is also able to 'see' words. Individual utterances are configured as onscreen text: words pass through his lips and float impossibly into the diegetic space. Not only is the character tasked to gather 'dirt' on celebrity victims for the ethically-dubious tabloid, the clarity of Don's speech is

regularly undermined by his propensity for visualising language. By therefore animating a discrepancy between speech and words, *Dirt* plays with Don's inability to speak his own truth.

Within the construction of Don, the schizophrenia of a British actor playing an American onscreen is maintained as a broader concern of the series' narrative. In a similar portrayal of mental illness, British actor Freddie Highmore's role as American Norman Bates in *Bates Motel* (NBC, 2013-) also feeds into the 'difference' of schizophrenic Norman as he is coded as a murderous 'other.' However, the extratextual discourses surrounding the 'accented American' have remained a gift for the expressive scope they have provided programmes to conflate offscreen Britishness with onscreen Americanness. In the pilot episode for *House,* for example, Laurie's New Jersey accent is heard prior to the character's full introduction. The deliberate withholding of House's physical form plays with his identity that, prior to Laurie's first visual appearance is connoted only through his vocal attributes. House's dialogue expresses his desire to resemble anyone other than a medical specialist, muttering to his colleague James Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard) that 'I don't want them to think that I am a doctor.' In seeking to obstruct his real identity (refusing to wear a white doctor's coat as a marker of his profession), House plays with notions of his own 'truthful' identity, one that he otherwise wishes to disguise. But the simultaneous privileging of sound over image, the vocal over visual, 'lifts' out Laurie's accent in an act of exhibitionist display and instantly defining the character through how he sounds. Textual curiosity with the 'accented American' may, however, also manifest during moments in which British actors (playing Americans) momentarily speak in their true accent (or an approximation of it) as befits a character's clandestine behaviour. In season one, episode six of *House* ('The Socratic Method'), House affects an upper crust British accent on the telephone,

as part of a verbal trick to obtain illegally the case history of a schizophrenic patient. His faked British accent here playfully gestures towards Laurie's earlier roles on British television. This scene both reprises Laurie's portrayal of royal nobility throughout the *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983-1989) series, and recalls his role as a member of the British high-class aristocracy (and idle rich) in the adaptation of P.G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves & Wooster* (Picture Partnership Productions, 1990-1993). Such a sequence of vocal playfulness in *House* provides a momentary—and entirely self-conscious—linguistic lapse, one that provides a clue to the actor's authentic citizenship whilst reflecting back on House's own schizophrenic nationality.

In *The Wire* too, there are similar sequences literally 'in dialogue' with the actor's real-life British voice. *The Wire* explores the war of attrition between—and complementary power structures of—the police department and gangs ruling the streets of Baltimore. Early in David Simon's series, (in the series two episode 'Stray Rounds') resourceful Baltimore Detective Jimmy McNulty goes undercover as Englishman 'John Cromwell' to infiltrate a Greek brothel. As part of his ruse, McNulty (played by British actor Dominic West) adopts an unconvincing London accent in order to make credible his cover story as an 'out of towner.' Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) then asks McNulty if he 'does any accents,' and McNulty/West responds feebly: 'Crikey, I was lookin' to get a little hanky-panky,' a line delivered using an exaggerated Cockney lilt. This exchange mines its humour from the supposed vocal limitations of American actors who are unable to perform convincingly as British characters. McNulty's accented speech and 'James Cromwell' impersonation defaults to the stereotypical, 'overdone' East London dialect, replete with (working) class associations and patterns of rhyming slang. The verbal negotiation of Britishness with Americanness is, however, overturned by having West as an English actor adopting a bad or exaggerated English

accent as channelled through his own American character. A fake British accent is therefore undertaken in a fake American accent, all the while hiding away the real British accent behind the Mid-Atlantic States, 'Baltimorese' dialect.

The 'Britishness' of UK actors need not be erased when the role demands convincing American speech. Rather, the presence of 'Britishness' is abstracted: a spectre that looms large over the performance of Americanness as it is conveyed onscreen. This has further implications for those debates around taste and judgement of television itself. Among the criteria prescribed to recent 'quality' television, Robert J. Thompson argues for the prominent place of 'self-consciousness' as part of a process in which the 'stigmatized medium' of television reclaims its cultural cachet (1996: 15). As Thompson puts it, through the considered mobilisation of self-conscious strategies, such 'quality' programmes 'announce that they are superior to the typical trash available on television' (1996: 15). The textual conflation of Britishness and American national identity contributes to the self-conscious aspect of contemporary quality television, a primary signifier of quality drawing upon latent Britishness for storytelling purposes. The portrayals of 'accented Americans' do not move entirely away from the actor's true nationality, but confront it by folding an abstract conception of Britishness back into the portrayal of Americanness. However, nowhere is this reciprocating relationship between British actor and 'accented' performance more overt than in a recent television series that relies upon the questioning of national allegiance as part of its overarching narrative impetus.

'I'm an American': questioning national allegiance in *Homeland*

Speech and accents—as audible manifestations or linguistic embodiments of a national identity—function as signifiers of origin. Discussing voice discrimination as a form of

racism across American society, Rosina Lippi-Green identifies how accents serve as 'the first point of gatekeeping,' and that a voice with a foreign inflection 'becomes a litmus test for exclusion' (2001: 64). America's post-9/11 terrain and the country's heightened suspicion of a latent 'un-American' presence have certainly multiplied cultural anxieties around the ideologies of language. The founding of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was designed to strategically manage and disarm terrorist threats to American territory by anti-Western Islamic militants, and to enforce immigration laws at cabinet-level. The Homeland Security Act signed into law on 25 November 2002 was geared towards protecting American citizens 'from the dangers of a new era,' shoring up the country's economic security whilst minimizing the country's vulnerability from threats both international and domestic. Framed by America's post-9/11 political landscape, accent and confused national origin coalesce with the portrayal of an 'accented American' in *Homeland*, the American drama-thriller television series based on the Israeli programme *Hatufim/Prisoners of War* (Channel 2, 2010) created by Gideon Raff. The original series plots the reintegration of Israeli Defense Force soldier Nimrod Klein back into society following his capture in Lebanon.

The critically-acclaimed US adaptation from writers Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, however, takes its cue from the collective consciousness and political consequences of post-9/11 America. Gordon and Gansa reframe Klein's post-kidnap trauma in line with America's susceptibility to terrorist attack in which the distinction between foreign and domestic threats is irretrievably blurred. *Homeland*'s overarching narrative centres upon US Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody, and the ongoing suspicions of his terrorist sympathy towards al-Qaeda by CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), herself afflicted with the unpredictable symptoms of bipolar disorder. During the pilot episode of *Homeland*, broadcast on 2 October 2011, Carrie is informed by an imprisoned Iraqi

asset that an American Prisoner of War has been 'turned.' Upon her return to Langley, Carrie is summoned to watch footage detailing the discovery of a wounded military body during a Delta Force raid by American troops in Afghanistan. As Central Intelligence joyfully gathers to watch the incoming video stream of the returning soldier, the voice of the presumed-dead Brody pierces the dusty underground bunker with a potent sign of his survival: 'I'm an American.'

In one of the few critical analyses of *Homeland*, John Carlos Rowe describes the programme as a form of post-9/11 'cultural therapy', continuing the anti-terrorist narrative of Twentieth Century-Fox's political thriller *24* (2001-2010). While *24* traded upon the iconography of the Hollywood action film genre to amplify its bombastic, muscular (and hyper-masculine) narrative urgency, *Homeland* adopts a more reflective approach towards the possibilities for foreign-as-domestic terrorism in the US and mines themes of government secrecy and misinformation afflicting its backdrop of the 2003-2011 political landscape.[1]

Homeland assumes its place alongside a wave of US television series set against the backdrop of political power struggles and governmental corruption, including *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), *Commander in Chief* (ABC, 2005-2006), *Covert Affairs* (NBC, 2010-), *The Event* (NBC, 2010), *Boss* (Lionsgate, 2011-2012), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-), *Veep* (HBO, 2012-), *The First Family* (Entertainment Studios, 2012-), *Hostages* (Warner Bros. Television, 2013), *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-) and *Madam Secretary* (CBS, 2014-). These exemplars of multi-camera, long-form television traverse a range of genres, from parody and political satire to adult treatments that owe a debt to the suspense and conspiracy of the longstanding political thriller genre. A highly-successful small screen drama negotiating the global war on terror (with a fourth

season premiering in October 2014), *Homeland*'s broader thematic concerns of Brody's dubious national allegiance and anxieties over a threat to US security function as a fruitful corollary to the wave of British actors now affecting American accents on US television. Despite CIA Deputy Director David Estes' emphatic claim that Brody is 'one of ours,' the croaky, rasping, tentative voice of all-American Marine heard in the recovered video transmission is provided by a British actor, Damian Lewis. Born in St. John's Wood, London and educated at Eton College, Lewis honed his American accent on Steven Spielberg's acclaimed 10-part miniseries *Band of Brothers* (HBO, 2001). More recently, Lewis was cast as US Detective Charlie Crews in NBC's crime drama *Life* (2007-2009), a series concerning imprisonment, corruption and conspiracy that has certain correlatives to the captive narrative of *Homeland*.

Critical discussions of Lewis's American accent in *Homeland* are certainly not resistant to—nor can they be insulated from—the cultural discourses surrounding the fascination of the 'accented American.' Lewis has consistently won industry praise for his portrayal of the conflicted Brody, winning the Emmy Award for 'Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series' in 2012, and the Golden Globe for 'Best Actor in a Television Series Drama' in 2013. The credibility of his US accent in *Homeland* has been earmarked as a primary component of his success, whist inciting a degree of intrigue around his falsified Americanness. In an article entitled 'Wait... Damian Lewis is British?!', *Telegraph* journalist Anita Singh reflects upon the actor's true nationality and her own 'surprised delight' in learning of his Britishness (2012: npn). Singh even cites one viewer on social media who conceded 'Hearing Damian Lewis speak with a British accent is like being told Santa Claus isn't real' (Singh 2012: npn). The cultural fascination of Lewis-as-Brody, however, enhances the reception and consumption of his character. The actor's non-native identity breeds his 'un-American activity' throughout

Homeland, and his latent Britishness nourishes the potential superficiality of Brody's patriot act that is sustained throughout each series.

By casting a British actor to play Brody, the implications of masked 'foreignness' and the character's questionable 'Americanness' are co-opted into *Homeland*'s narrative of national security and domestic terrorist attack. Rowe suggests that *Homeland* hinges precisely on the idea that 'the 'foreign' antagonist now looks just like an 'American,' whatever that generalized appearance might really be' (Rowe 2013: 193). Brody's unkempt and dishevelled (re)appearance is deceptive, tapping into the 'panoptical presence of Homeland security in Americans' daily lives,' but also American cultural anxieties around neo-imperialism and a wider US national identity 'we still cannot define' (Rowe 2013: 193-195). Just as Carrie begins to question the Brody family patriarch's true allegiance, Brody himself is, perhaps, not to be trusted onscreen precisely because viewers already know him to be 'doing an accent.' However convincing or credible, Lewis' British identity becomes more firmly implicated within the mythology of the character he is portraying, and in particular the 'secret mission' Brody is (possibly or possibly not) undertaking. Brody's floating 'Britishness' thus informs the viewers' own sense of mistrust towards the character, adding to an onscreen allegiance that already manifests itself as disoriented and fuzzy. In *Homeland*, accents do not define identities; voices are not set in stone.

The drama of *Homeland* emerges from whether Brody is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as he adjusts to civilian life following his capture by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, or whether he really has been 'turned' and now acting on behalf of his captors in response to the collateral damage of civilian lives during the US military occupation of Iraq. Such ambiguity around the conflicted Brody both hinges upon, and

is amplified by, extratextual discourses of the actor's real-life foreignness. In the extended season finale of *Homeland*, 'Marine One,' it is ultimately Brody's voice that mitigates the character's American allegiance, and betrays to his suspecting family the marine's conversion to Islam. Brody is discovered by his rebellious teenage daughter Dana (Morgan Saylor) secretly undertaking the morning prayers of a faithful Muslim. His chanting of 'Allahu Akbar' connotes an abrupt aural shift away from Americanness: a returning POW vocally enforcing his status as a potential sleeper agent as the programme draws on a perceived cultural incompatibility between a US marine and a Muslim. Jonathan Freedland argues that 'we know there are white American converts to Islam, but there is an extra charge in seeing such a transformation in a US marine, one who has been beaten, tortured and imprisoned by jihadist extremists' (2012: npn). The effect of Brody's deception is doubled, then, first by the masking of Lewis' extratextual 'Britishness' by onscreen Americanness, and then again by Brody's supposed disloyalty to the American military. *Homeland*, then, poses a scenario in which national identity can be effortlessly re-negotiated, slipped in and out of, tried on and then discarded. Identity is exchanged through speech, and the voice is both shifting and shifty, not a true marker of nationality but primed to be falsified and faked at the drop of a vowel.

The narrativisation of the 'accented American' on US television has continued to be expanded and elaborated in another contemporary series, one that resides firmly in the shadow cast by *Homeland*'s portrayal of falsified Americanness. Created by former CIA officer Joe Weisberg and set in the Cold War period of the 1980s, *The Americans* (FX, 2013-) is a spy thriller series concerning two Soviet KGB officers posing as an American married couple 'The Jennings' in the suburbs of Washington D.C. Revisiting the cultural paranoia and Cold War tensions between the Eastern and Western Bloc, *The Americans* trades in the period's heightened suspicion, and its themes of defection,

secret identities and covert espionage. However, through its specific casting practices, *The Americans* brings together actor and character through the notion of a counterfeit vocal performance. Originally premiering in January 2013, the series' first episode includes a telling exchange between two FBI agents Chris Amador (Maximiliano Hernández) and Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich). Amador admits to Beeman that in the current political climate, KGB agents dedicated to the Soviet motherland are 'Super secret spies living next door. They look like us, speak better English than we do, they are not allowed to say a single word in Russian when they get here.' The casting of Welsh actor Matthew Rhys as American Philip Jennings (in truth a Soviet agent named Mischa), again places narrative concerns of questionable national allegiance within a broader discourse of falsified Americanness ushered in by the 'accented American.' Just as Mischa maintains the facade that he is white collar American businessman, Rhys is involved in a similar act of performance and pretension funnelled through the persuasiveness of his accent. He is a Welshman, playing a Russian who is performing as an American. As with Lewis' portrayal as Brody, any extratextual knowledge on the part of the viewer that Rhys is a 'fake American,' only brings into further relief the duplicitous facets of his character in *The Americans*, and the dangerous exchange of identities that underpins the trajectory of Jennings as a spy. Just as the undercover agents in *The Americans* are, as Amador concedes, 'living next door,' a growing wealth of British-born actors in contemporary US television drama have managed to integrate seamlessly and convincingly into their adopted homeland.

Conclusion: beyond national typecasting?

The 'accented American' has emerged as a key component of the mise-en-scène of original US television drama, multiplying as the volume of high-quality programming increases in accordance with global distribution and transnational arrangements, the

expansion of television franchises and an increase in US/UK co-productions (including local format adaptations) (Weissman 2012: 149). Within these shifting parameters of American television production, a number of UK actors have been relied upon to embody home-grown Americans, as the recent casting of Clive Owen as New York native Dr. John Thackery in *The Knick* (Cinemax, 2014-) and Christopher Eccleston as American pastor Matt Jamison in *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-) testifies. But such characterisations are increasingly shaped and informed by (audience knowledge of) the actor's own transnationality and falsified Americanness. For the upcoming *Tyrant* (FX, 2014-), British television star Adam Rayner has been cast as Bassam Al Fayeed, an Arab exiled from the fictional Middle-Eastern country Abbudin. Channelling the global turmoil of the Middle East and American-Arab relations through the tribulations of the individual, *Tyrant* engages with Rayner's own 'immigrant' status as a counterfeit, 'accented American' by exploring Bassam's assimilated American life through his return to his homeland with his new all-American family. As FBI deep-cover operative and gifted spy 'of many faces' Martin Odum in *Legends* (TNT, 2014-), Yorkshire-born actor Sean Bean also plays a character adept at impersonating an American. Yet whereas *Legends* frames Odum's (increasingly involuntary) linguistic lapses between UK and US vernacular as a precarious symptom of his mental exhaustion and growing psychological anguish (and, like *Homeland*'s Brody, connoting his possible 'rogue' status), there remains little anxiety over the British identities of UK actors as they irretrievably recede from view.

Although 'the days when the British actor could forge a career simply by being British' have long since ended (Spicer 2006, 146), the concentrated 'Americanization' of UK-born actors through accomplished vocal mimicry—and the British performers' contribution to US television more generally—testifies to an increasing freedom, rather

than a lost identity. Under the guise of the 'accented American,' UK actors on US television have escaped prior archetypes and sidestepped national typecasting. With previous roles, Britain's transnational cultural history and imperial, colonial image became 'activated' within the 'American folk memory,' yielding popular models of pre-packaged cinematic Britishness across Hollywood cinema (Spicer 2006: 141). With the advent of the 'accented American,' however, new images of British stardom have posed a challenge to such generic roles. But beyond a more eclectic range of characters available to UK actors, the 'accented American' has also reinvigorated the 'lesser specularisation' and 'restrained publicity' typically reserved for British stars: a tendency that traditionally resulted in 'muted' conceptions of British national stardom (Babington 2001: 6-7). Not only resuscitating the voice as an integral (if often overlooked) performance element, the recent wave of Brits-as-Americans have stealthily Anglicised television, crafting emergent stars of the small-screen who have been subjected to familiar star discourse and promoted as the series' main attraction. But despite the veiling of British identity through American regional and national accents, the visibility of Britishness is not necessarily occluded by the lack of phonological truth to their speech. Britishness is instead retained, ready to be invoked, and often as crucial to the construction and mythology of the character as the false American accent in which they speak.

References

Babington, Bruce (2001), 'Introduction: British stars and stardom,' in Babington, Bruce (ed), *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 1-28.

Buist, Erica (2014), 'Leave David Tennant alone – he makes a pretty good American,' *The Guardian*. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/15/david-tennant-american-scotsman-accent-fox-broadchurch [Accessed 19/05/14].

Dyer, Richard (1998), *Stars*, London: BFI Publishing.

Erigha, Maryann (2013), 'And They Lived Happily Ever After...or Not at All: (Un)Imagining African Americans in Recession-Era Popular Culture,' in Boyle, Kirk and Daniel Mrozowski (eds.), *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, pp. 135-148.

Freedland, Jonathan (2012), 'Why the Israeli version of Homeland has even more shock value,' *The Guardian*. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/shortcuts/2012/mar/04/israeli-homeland-even-more-shocking [Accessed 19/05/14].

Gilbert, Gerard (2013), 'The test pilots: The British actors that have won (and lost) the battle for American TV,' *The Independent*. Available from: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/the-test-pilots-the-british-actors-that-have-won-and-lost-the-battle-for-american-tv-8792723.html [Accessed 10/05/14].

Grosz, Christy (2014), 'Why Brits Like Hugh Dancy and Matthew Rhys Are Taking Over American TV,' *Variety*. Available from: http://variety.com/2014/tv/features/hugh-dancy-matthew-rhys-brits-taking-over-american-tv-1201211388/ [Accessed 10/05/14].

Gunning, Tom (2004), ''Now you see it, now you don't.' The temporality of the cinema of attractions,' in Grieveson, Lee, and Peter Krämer (eds), *The Silent Cinema Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 41-50.

Jacobs, Jason (2006), 'Al Swearengen, Philosopher King,' in Lavery, David (ed.), *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, London: I.B Tauris, pp. 11-21.

Jones, Ellen E. (2014), 'Fargo, TV review: Casting Martin Freeman a stroke of genius in a show brimming with stories,' *The Independent*. Available from: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/fargo-tv-review-martin-freemans-casting-is-a-stroke-of-genius-9272328.html [Accessed 19/05/14].

King, Geoff (2000), *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, London: IB Tauris.

Lippi-Green, Rosina (2001), *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*, London: Routledge.

McDonald, Paul (2012), 'Story and Show: The Basic Contradiction of Film Star Acting,' in Taylor, Aaron (ed.), *Theorizing Film Acting*, London: Routledge, pp. 168-183.

McDonald, Paul (2013), *Hollywood Stardom*, West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing.

Macnab, Geoffrey (2000), *Searching for Stars: Stardom and Screen Acting in British Cinema: Rethinking British Cinema*, London: Cassell.

McCabe, Janet and Kim Akass (2007), 'Introduction: Debating Quality,' in McCabe, Janet and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 1-12.

Naremore, James (1990), *Acting in the Cinema*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Phillips, Alastair and Ginette Vincendeau (2006), 'Film Trade, Global Culture and Transnational Cinema: An Introduction," in Phillips, Alastair and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *Journeys of Desire: European Actors in Hollywood*, A Critical Companion, London: BFI Publishing, pp. 3-18.

Ray, Rachel (2013), 'House, Homeland, The Walking Dead: British actors beat the Americans at their own accents,' *The Telegraph*. Available from: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9914718/House-Homeland-The-Walking-Dead-British-actors-beat-the-Americans-at-their-own-accents.html [Accessed 19/05/14].

Rhodes, Gary D. (2010), 'Two Helens and a Host of Tricks: Tod Browning's *The Thirteenth Chair*,' in Cline, John and Robert G. Weiner, *From Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century*, Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, pp. 23-40.

Rowe, John Carlos (2013), 'American Orientalism after Said,' in Soliman, Mounira and Walid El Hamamsy (eds.), *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, New York: Routledge, pp. 183-196.

Sergi, Gianluca (1999), 'Actors and the Sound Gang,' in Lovell, Alan and Peter Krämer (eds.), *Screen Acting*, London: Routledge, pp. 107-114.

Siegel, Jeff (2010), *Second Dialogue Acquisition*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Singh, Anita (2012), 'Emmys 2012: 'Wait... Damian Lewis is British?!'' *The Telegraph*. Available from: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9563756/Emmys-2012-Wait...-Damian-Lewis-is-British.html [Accessed 19/05/14].

Sowards, Stacey K. and Richard D. Pineda (2011), 'Latinidad in *Ugly Betty*: Authenticity and the paradox of representation,' in Holling, Michelle A. and Bernadette M. Calafell (eds.), *Latina/o Discourse in Vernacular Spaces: Somos de una voz?*, Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 123-143.

Spencer, Clare (2010), 'Why are British actors playing Americans?' *BBC News*. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8643941.stm [Accessed 19/05/14].

Spicer, Andrew (2006), 'Acting Nasty? British Male Actors in Contemporary Hollywood,' in Phillips, Alastair and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *Journeys of Desire: European Actors in Hollywood*, A Critical Companion, London: BFI Publishing, pp. 141-152.

Thompson, Robert J. (1996), *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, New York: Continuum Publishing.

Thompson, Robert J. (2007), 'Preface,' in McCabe, Janet and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. xvii-xx.

Weissman, Elke (2012), *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence Between the US and UK*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wickstrom, Maurya (2012), *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yapalater, Lauren (2013), *'16 TV Actors You Might Not Have Realized Weren't American' Buzzfeed*. Available from: http://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/tv-actors-you-might-not-have-realized-werent-american#360m4v4 [Accessed 19/05/14].

Notes

[1] In *Homeland*, Brody's eight year incarceration and his subsequent release in 2011 places his original capture in 2003 at the time of George W. Bush's 'Mission accomplished' speech, where the then-US President declared in a televised address to end major combat operations in Iraq. Brody's capture, torture and rehabilitation in *Homeland* all unfold during the subsequent Iraqi insurgency and his release loosely coincides with the withdrawal of military personnel from the country in December 2011. The questions arising around Brody's patriotic allegiance thus occur in the immediate aftermath of the last US troops leaving Iraq for Kuwait; a period of sectarian violence and attacks against Iraq's Shia population, but also one culminating public hearings into military conduct during the Iraq War.